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ABSTRACT

Most teachers of adult professionals have been teachers of a younger student population. The characteristics of adult learners and their learning process necessitates other considerations in the designing of learning experiences. Additionally, the content to be learned and the responsibilities of the teacher are essential considerations in teaching adult professionals. A chart accompanies this document outlining the skills of successful moderators. (Author/JD)

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A B S T R A C T

STAFF DEVELOPMENT:
TEACHING ADULT PROFESSIONALS

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STAFF DEVELOPMENT: TEACHING ADULT PROFESSIONALS

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Most leaders of adult professional workshops, classes, or conferences have been teachers of children, adolescents, or college students. They met groups of students daily or weekly over many months. The content to be learned was divided into small, short steps and delivered daily or weekly to students. This approach to learning does not transfer to adult professionals learning in short, intensive, instructional situations.

Adults are not little children or adolescents, and a different perspective is needed by teachers of adult professionals. Adult characteristics must be considered in the design and implementation of adult learning environments. Adult characteristics of importance are:

#1. ADULTS MAKE AND ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR OWN DECISIONS

The process of growing up involves moving from dependence to independence. Adults decide what they need or what interests them and can take action to get it. In a workshop we get up and move around when we are tired of sitting, and sometimes we even leave or "drop out" for a short time. We decide what sessions we want to attend or even if we want to attend any of the sessions at that particular time. We decide what books or articles we really are going to read.

Adult learners do not want to be treated as children or talked down to. A workshop leader is in a peer situation and the learning must become a joint venture with mutual give-and-take in the learning experience.

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#2. ADULTS ARE EXPERIENCED

The adult professionals in any workshop have a wealth of experience. We have traveled; we have had many jobs; many are raising families; many are teachers; and all have been students with an educational history. We are not starting from scratch with a limited experience base.

All content must ultimately be integrated into the personal schema of the participant. There needs to be constant exploration by the leader of the content to find the fit into each person's perceptual orientation built from his/her own experience. Adults' experiences must be accommodated in any workshop format. For example, the adult who has used similar resources within their own classroom should be given the opportunity to make a mini-presentation to the group about those resources.

#3. ADULTS ARE VERBAL

Children and youth throughout their education acquire an increasing mastery of the language. As adults, language is in full verbal bloom. In fact, most of us are too verbal. We don't listen very well, except to our own grandiosity. We have our feelings under control and often deny they even exist. To get us to participate in other than verbal activities requires much effort, coaxing, subterfuge, or <u>trust</u>. Most adult learning is verbal, but variation from this norm is essential in any workshop.

#4. ADULTS ARE ACHIEVEMENT ORIENTED

As adults, we continually strive to get better at what we do, to learn more, to be successful. We don't like to "waste time" unless there is some inherent goal or purpose in the "wasting." We continually create new goals for ourselves and set out to obtain them.

In many workshops the leisurely, relaxed, informal environment works

against this expectation of achievement. Participants come expecting alot to be going on, ready to go to work at learning, and then the workshop becomes so slow and methodical that excitement and energy dissipate. A packed agenda with lots of resources keeps energies high and creates enough options for adults to exercise decision-making responsibilities.

These characteristics of adults have implications for the learning process. Any workshop must be based on the knowledge of how people learn.

The following chart summarizes the components of the adult learning process:

THE LEARNING PROCESS	
1. EXPLORATION	Participants need an opportunity to get acquainted with the content. Think of exploration as getting participants to view the goods before the auction starts rather than just waiting for them to be put up, one by one. Participants can look at materials, skim articles, generate questions, or share opinions with others. Participants need time to get involved with the content in their own way if useful learning is to occur.
2. INTERACTION	Participants' own experiences, feelings, attitudes form the base for the most important learning experiences. Interaction is a way of removing participants from their relative isolation, getting input from other perspectives, and furthering thinking. Variable grouping patterns - between friends, strangers, pairs, small group, large group - are necessary to encourage the most productive interaction.
3. ACTIVE PARTICIPATION	Twenty minutes is as long as most of us can sit in one place without fidgeting. Even concerts have intermissions. The need of all participants for physical movement and use of senses is often forgotten in adult learning. Just changing groups provides some movement. Activities which demand active listening, rather than passive listening, will increase the alertness and, therefore, learning of most groups.
4. REFLECTION AND ARTICULATION	Reflection must remain open-ended with no expectation of "right" or "wrong" responses and serve as a vehicle for clarification and understanding. A do-stop-think process is necessary to make sense of activity that can otherwise be perceived as isolated and useless. Reflecting and articulating by participants on what, how, and why of the activity raise learning from the unconscious to a conscious level.
5. SYNTHESIS OR INTEGRATION	Time is most often the major factor in synthesizing and it cannot be programmed to occur. For participants to integrate new learning with what they already know, a task or assignment to be done later is helpful. Comparing past with present also furthers this process. Without synthesis, each new technique, skill, or concept becomes just one more "innovation."

The learning process must then be integrated with the specific content to be learned. Workshop content can be organized in the following manner:

THE CONTENT OF LEARNING	
AWARENESS:	Awareness sessions are usually introductions to a concept or technique. Participants rarely learn skills here but should leave the session with the information necessary for deciding whether they want to know more or whether the information presented could be useful in their work. Such sessions should be short - 2 hours at most - and exploratory in nature.
SKILLS:	Participants should leave a skill session with at least one new skill. Trainer demonstration and participant practice with leadership shifting from the trainer to the participants is a common sequence. The length of the session depends on the complexity of the skill, but participants must leave knowing what they have learned.
TRANSFER OF SKILLS:	Learning a skill and trying it out on the job are two different activities. A "transfer" session best directly follows a skill-learning session. Providing both activities eliminates premature judgments like "my students won't do this," "this is dumb" or "I don't see how this will help in my work." Participants need to separate themselves as learners from themselves as workers and be given a safe situation to try out the skill. Then problems can be discussed on the basis of real experience.
KNOWLEDGE:	Knowledge sessions include facts, theories, concepts, ideas. The most successful knowledge sessions include exploration, participation in short experiments, structured observations, and reading interspersed with a number of structured reflections. The lecture that holds the attention well enough or long enough to achieve understanding is possible, but rare.
ATTITUDE:	Changing or developing attitudes is hard and at best can only occur through very intensive learning experiences over a 5-day period or over a very long time period with less intense instruction.

Individualizing instruction with large groups to offer several levels simultaneously in a short amount of time is almost impossible. To make offerings available beyond awareness and skills necessitates the commitment of participants to expending more time and effort and requires greater financial resources for instructors.

Adult characteristics, the learning process, and the content to be learned determine the responsibilities of the workshop leader.

A workshop leader is:

1. A designer
2. A host/hostess
3. A manager
4. A moderator

As a designer, the first task of a workshop leader is to develop the workshop experience. The design grows from proposed goals and objectives. Activities must work toward the objectives while considering the learning process of adults.

Regardless of the specific design process used by the leader, we all read, think, scribble, talk and repeatedly go over the plans to get the activities, methods, and questions to the best levels possible. Once the workshop begins, our attention can then focus on other dimensions of our responsibility. The basic design must be in place - whether in our heads or on paper.

As a workshop begins, the initial role is one of a host or hostess. The responsibility is to create a temporary environment, set the tone, and establish the parameters of what will be happening. As with a host or hostess, the beginning point is to send invitations. Letters to each

participant prior to the workshop, giving times, places, expectation, dress, materials to bring, etc., reduce ambiguity and doubts. The letter sets a personal tone and level of comfort that participants appreciate. The atmosphere of the workshop is established through your arrangement of the room, your informal greeting of participants as they arrive, helping with registration, introducing them to others, and responding to individual questions. All this is done before the workshop starts. If participants feel welcomed, at ease, and comfortable in "your home," the work ahead becomes much easier and more fun.

Additionally, a workshop leader has managing duties which occur before, during, and after the workshop. Before the workshop, all the arrangement details for materials, facilities, and equipment must be done. Then it is necessary to go over workshop plans with co-trainers, small group leaders, and other helpers. Experience proves that any long workshop necessitates a "logistics helper." No amount of planning can overcome the last minute details and snags of room assignments, billing procedures, projector cords, emergency calls from home, etc. These details are all important to someone and they do need care and attention, but the workshop must go on and a helper can be a key to the success of workshops.

As the workshop develops, the manager begins to manage other dimensions: the grouping, timing of activities, the pace of the day, the creation of ad hoc activities, the coordination of simultaneous strands, the reintegration of groups, etc. Many workshop leaders seem like drivers of cars charging down the road. My preference is to be a mechanic who keeps all parts of the car in good, working order as it moves down the road to the destination. All problems have to be anticipated and corrected before a breakdown occurs,

because the arrival time is predetermined - everyone knows for sure when they are going home and any lateness or failures only detracts from the overall pleasure of the trip.

The manager's role after the workshop is to analyze, summarize, evaluate, and report what happened. Decisions and judgments will be made about follow-up, additional workshops, or impact, and the workshop leader must provide information for that process.

The final task of the workshop leader is that of a moderator. This task, due to the verbal characteristic of adult learners, is of major importance in determining the outcomes and success of any workshop. At least 50% of the total workshop time will be spent in some form of "talking." Both the structure and the focus (or lack of focus) for this "talking" is set by the leader. The failure of many workshops can be directly traced to the lack of value in the talking.

The skills of successful moderators are presented in the following chart:

SKILLFUL MODERATORS KNOW HOW TO	
1. INITIATE DISCUSSIONS	Good discussions are sparked by key questions or statements that engage the person's imagination to relook, to see differently, or to connect new points.
2. PROVIDE INFORMATION	Too many discussions occur in a vacuum without a focus point, a place to begin, and no input to keep them moving. The leaders seem to be saying, "I really don't know anything. What do you think?" A good moderator knows what information, how much, and when to give it to further the exploration of the participants.
3. ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION	Discussions are structured to insure all the opportunity to participate. Techniques to do this include: 1-1 rotating concentric circle, questions on cards, collected and read by another person, oral completion of open statements around the room, small groups with specific open topics, etc.
4. SET NORMS	There should be clear expectations for the discussion process: key points are written down, important information is shared, information is summarized, and all contributions are treated with respect.
5. HARMONIZE DIFFERENCES	Differences of opinion and different perceptions are the essence of discussions but the value of the discussion lies in finding the common goal, sorting the points of disagreement, focusing on the various answers, and keeping the group moving together toward the common goal.
6. COORDINATE THE INFORMATION	Links and connections must be made between speakers to keep the discussion focused and moving. The value of each person's contribution is in the relating of separate points to form the total.
7. SUMMARIZE THE DISCUSSIONS	If the time spent in discussion was of any value, there must be key points or something of importance which adds to the learning of participants. This needs to be clearly and concisely stated by someone.

The importance of moderator's skills in leading discussions cannot be overemphasized. People talk about "leader style," but the nitty-gritty of this style seems to be the way we conduct the "talk flow" of workshops. Through the talk, participants feel that they are involved, that they are heard and respected, that what they contribute is important, and that we all had a part of the learning.

The following suggestions may be useful to keep in mind as the leader and person responsible for workshop "talk."

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS

1. In leading a discussion, remember a discussion is not just a conversation. Many conversations are rambling and formless, jumping from topic to topic--and they may be enjoyable just because of this. A discussion, by contrast, should be more focused and directed to a specific topic. It is your job to insure that the discussion remains relevant, and that rambling is minimized.

2. In discussions personal experiences are valuable--but beware of their becoming too personal. Some participants may be tempted to use the discussion as a confessional. If you permit this to develop, the result can be very difficult emotional situations, which have little learning value. It is best to nip this tendency in the bud. Be polite and empathetic, but firm. Later, in private, listen but don't waste the time of the total group.

3. Aim at achieving balanced participation from the group. Some people may want to "say their piece," but often many in the group are not interested in such speeches. Try to go through the session in a relaxed, yet purposeful style, without prolonging the session for the entire group. Change the grouping format to create different interaction patterns.

4. Remember that role plays and games, case studies, and written exercises are valuable primarily in setting the stage for the related discussions. Therefore, make sure that sufficient time is left for these discussions and that the questions are focused and directed to a specific topic.

Leading workshops takes skill and practice. Being flexible and spontaneous both in the design and the implementation of workshops occurs after substantial experience. The leader who "wings it," has continual "rap sessions," and keeps changing direction is either irresponsible or a novice.

A final adult characteristic:

#5. ADULTS ARE JUDGMENTAL.